



Research Paper

Disembodied voices, embodied places: Mobile technology, enabling discourse, and interpreting place



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Residents conduct asset mapping on their own through the use of smartphones.
- Asset mapping included self-authored digital videos and use of an online map.
- We examine the impacts of their efforts on the planning discourse around a city park.
- We suggest this type of asset mapping enabled engagement in multiple discourses.
- This type of asset mapping increased community influence on the planning discourse.

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ABSTRACT

This paper pursues the research question how can asset mapping using mobile technology impact the discursive planning environment affecting a cultural landscape? This paper examines this through the review of a case study entitled *Cellphone Diaries*. It features the work of African American community residents who participated in asset mapping using smartphones and created self-authored digital videos recording their memories of people, places, and events occurring in John Chavis Memorial Park. The park, located one mile southeast of the center of Raleigh, North Carolina and situated in the heart of Raleigh's largest historically African American community. The park was undergoing significant changes that the community interpreted as the loss of significant cultural landscape features. Through *Cellphone Diaries*, community residents created videos that were examined using discourse analysis, linked to an online map, and disseminated as a catalog of community perceptions of the meaning of the park. The location of their narratives on spatial maps produced a geographically referenced interpretive tool highlighting previously undocumented people, places, and events important to the community. The paper argues that the use of mobile technology constitutes a critical visualization approach that affected the park planning discourse by enabling community people to create material products (videos and maps) that positioned their narratives in multiple discourses beyond the immediate planning context. The larger influence of these expanded positions, including through media and arts community outlets, increased the power of their narratives to affect change in the park planning process.

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1. Introduction

Discursive planning environments are defined by the dynamics of contested planning values that converge, negotiate, and resolve in policy decisions shaping the built environment (Farhat, 2014; Hajer, 1995). Through discourse people living in communities can become activated as “agents” articulating positions based on their histories and values. Existing power relationships shape the potential impact of one’s position in discourse (Burke, 1962; Foucault,

1989). In some cases, leveraging community narratives can impact the power relationship in a discursive situation (Davies & Harre, 1990). Particularly in low resource communities engaged in discourse with more powerful agents about the future of their cultural landscapes, the documentation and communication of community narratives can grow influence and reshape the broader discourse to align with community frames.

For researchers engaged in discursive planning environments, methods of documenting narratives involving the people who keep the meaning and memories of place is essential. Asset mapping, pioneered by Kretzman and McKnight to empower communities working on neighborhood regeneration, is an important method used to engage communities in the documentation of their own

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Fig. 1. Context. This figure shows the context of the study area. North is on the left side of this diagram. The South Park/East Raleigh neighborhood is within one mile of the center of Downtown Raleigh. It is one of the oldest historically African American neighborhoods in the city. Chavis Park (in green) is one of Raleigh's oldest open spaces.

Image credit: Google Earth.

places (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). Asset mapping was created to build community capacity in low resource environments. One capacity was the ability to document both physical and non-physical assets that helped define meaningful places (McKnight, 2010). These assets included narratives. The physical settings where historic narratives were created comprised the elements of a shared “public memory”; a repository of stories essential for passing community defined values from one generation to the next (Hayden, 1997; Lewis, 1993). For designers and planners, the results of asset mapping can offer a useful window looking into community strengths.

An increase in mobile technology use, especially in communities of color, is a trend that could impact asset mapping. Through mobile devices like smartphones the tools needed for videography, photography, and mapping are increasingly in the hands of people. How does this increase in access and use of mobile technology impact the potential to engage people in planning efforts like asset mapping? And can this trend be leveraged in community planning discourse?

This paper pursues the research question *how can asset mapping using mobile technology impact the discursive planning environment affecting a cultural landscape?* This paper examines this question through the review of a case study entitled *Cellphone Diaries*. It features the work of African American community residents who participated in asset mapping using smartphones and created self-authored digital videos recording their memories of people, places, and events occurring in John Chavis Memorial Park. The park is located one mile southeast of the center of Raleigh, North Carolina and situated in the heart of Raleigh's largest historically African American community (Fig. 1). The park was undergoing significant changes that the community interpreted as the loss of significant cultural landscape features. Through *Cellphone Diaries*, community residents created videos that were reviewed using discourse analysis, linked to an online map, and disseminated as a catalog of community perceptions of the meaning of the park. The location of their narratives on maps produced a geographically referenced interpretive tool highlighting previously undocumented people, places, and events important to the community. These previously undocumented assets informed the creation of themes designed to guide future improvements to the park. This paper argues that the use of mobile technology constituted a critical visualization approach that affected the park planning discourse by enabling

community people create material products (videos and maps) that positioned their narratives in multiple discourses beyond the immediate planning context. The larger influence of these expanded discourses, including those defined by media and arts, increased the power of community narratives to affect change in the park planning process.

2. Literature review

2.1. Asset mapping and other community participatory documentation approaches

Asset mapping was developed as an alternative to needs based assessments of communities that defined places by their deficiencies. Asset mapping supports community based development strategies built from community identified strengths (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). Kretzman and McKnight argued that needs-based assessments in regenerating communities, particularly led by those from outside of the study communities, lacked the awareness of community assets and focused on strategies that did not empower community residents. Their alternative was to work with communities to self-identify their assets in nested scales of community control (Corbett et al., 2005; McKnight, 2010; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). With asset mapping, Kretzman and McKnight made a significant contribution to community regeneration strategies by reorienting inventory techniques to document a broad spectrum of community strengths that were not typically included in community regeneration strategies.

Kretzman and McKnight were policy specialists and not designers or planners and this impacted their definition of assets. Asset mapping involves some spatial mapping of physical elements of the built environment (including parks), but their emphasis was on the documentation of human skills, talents, and networks and on oral and written documentation (McKnight, 2010). Narratives about the history of places is incorporated into their framework but is not explicitly identified as a “building block” in any category. The lack of emphasis on community narratives offers an opportunity to expand the definition of asset from different disciplinary perspectives.

Asset mapping is often performed in groups in the community but not on the sites being mapped and inventoried. Group workshops supplemented by questionnaires and interviews are the most common asset mapping activities. The method relies on community recall of people and places of value around them. However, recent asset mapping work illustrates a trend of engaging community participants in on site documentation through the use of participatory photography techniques (Cowan, Alencar, McGarry, Lucena, & Nunes, 2010; Fahy & Cinneide, 2009; Santilli, Carroll-Scott, Wong, & Ickovics, 2011).

Asset mapping has some similarities to other participatory mapping techniques used in cultural anthropology, environmental psychology and geography, as well as “bottom up” oral history research techniques used in a wide range of disciplines (Corbett et al., 2005; Crampton, 2009; Zurita & Baloian, 2012). Participatory mapping approaches became more prevalent in design and planning professions with the rise of advocacy planning. Vision planning in particular engages designers and planners as facilitators of a community driven goal definition process where design priorities are identified and prioritized by communities (Sanoff, 2000). Sanoff presents a timeline for vision planning that overlaps with asset mapping. Vision planning focuses less on the human and social networks favored by Kretzman and McKnight and more on working with people to identify values and meanings associated with the physical infrastructure of communities.

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